HELEN KELLER: The Unconquerable

Carol Hughes

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Helen Keller: *The Unconquerable*

by CAROL HUGHES

THE STAIRWAYS OF history, winding back over the years, are thronged with the figures of men and women who conquered physical handicaps in their ascent to greatness. And out of their courage and gallantry have come imperishable stories that inspire millions of the living today.

Yet not even the long sweep of history has produced a more inspiring and symbolic figure of fortitude than Helen Keller, whose legendary achievements, from childhood to maturity, have been recorded within the comparatively

A Flower for Each Grave

THE CIVIL WAR was over, but the news brought little joy to the sleepy town of Columbus, Mississippi. Of the hundreds of men who had marched away, only a few returned. But this was a time for work, not tears. Columbus had stood in the path of bloody campaigns, and the dead must be given a last resting place. Soon the cemetery held hundreds of Confederate soldiers and some 40 men who had worn the Blue.

One spring day in the late '60s, three young women of Columbus, their arms full of flowers, began to tend the graves of husbands and sweethearts. One day they invited the young widow of a Confederate soldier to join them.

As her three companions knelt to place their bouquets, the widow stood erect, gazing over the other bare and forlorn graves. What a pity that these should be forgotten!

"Why don't we break our bouquets and place a flower on each grave?" she suggested. The women hesitated—then quietly untangled the bouquets and placed a blossom on each mound.

Soon thereafter, Columbus saw an unusual procession: a long line of young women in white and matrons in mourning, arms heaped with flowers, walking to pay homage to their country's dead. And that day, for the first time, *every* grave received a floral tribute.

The ceremony became a yearly custom, then spread to other towns and cities. And thus was born one of our great traditions—the solemn ceremony of Memorial Day.

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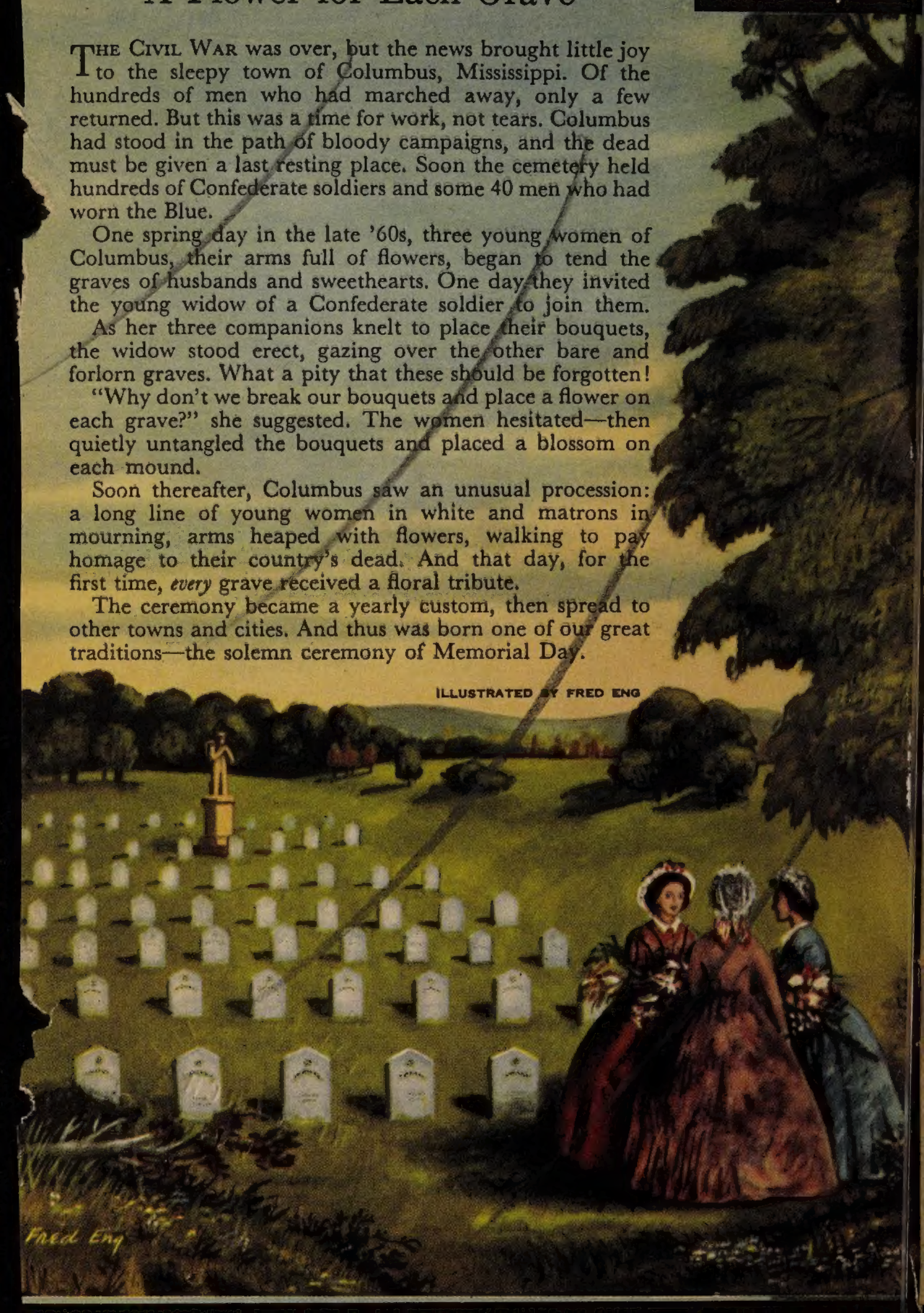

brief span of the times we live in.

Blind, deaf and dumb at the age of two, she was considered a complete idiot in 1882—a useless fragment of humanity, a subject for pity, condemned to be led and fed. Helen Keller, however, did not choose to accept this verdict, typical of public attitude toward the handicapped only 60 years ago. She chose to fight back with a courage that brought world-wide acclaim.

Yet even with a background especially suited to struggle against seemingly unconquerable handicaps, the story of her accomplishments has not been enough to batter down a common belief that Helen Keller, the woman, is not quite human. Through repeated exposure by the press of the world, she has emerged as a sort of namby-pamby creature who, in her endeavor always to be sweet and angelic, speaks only to answer, and listens only to agree.

Nothing could be further from the truth. In her autobiography, Miss Keller deplores this convenient and conventional picture of herself with the tongue-in-cheek, sarcastic wit which has made her a worthy opponent of America's best humorists. She writes:

"I have learned from the press that I was born blind, deaf and dumb; that I educated myself; that I could distinguish colors, hear telephone messages, predict when it was going to rain; that I was never discouraged, that I could do anything anybody else could do with all his faculties. They said this was miraculous—*and no wonder!*"

Helen Keller is about as placid as a volcano, and can erupt with as much violence. As a child she was a holy terror. As a teen-age student her teacher wrote of her: "Sometimes I wonder if I will ever tame this little savage." As a young woman she chose to go to Radcliffe College because, as she told her friend, President Wilson, "Radcliffe didn't want me, and I am stubborn by nature. I chose to override their objections."

As a young lady of 20, when the world was still shouting "idiot, oh, pity, pity," Helen Keller was shouting, "I want my own door key, to come and go as I please!" As an adult she was the first to fight and triumph over the ancient taboo that venereal diseases should never be mentioned in public. She brazenly wrote an article declaring that they were the cause of two-thirds of blindness in children.

When Andrew Carnegie became interested in her, even offering her an annuity, she fought so strongly with him on socialism versus capitalism that he threatened to take her over his knee and spank her. When she went out to raise money for the American Foundation for the Blind, she was such a formidable fund-raiser that one millionaire groaned: "Get her out of here! I'm afraid she'll decide I would be happier as a pauper, and I know in an argument she would win."

In short, Helen Keller fits the picture of the "gentle little maiden" about as neatly as Joe Louis. To

date, she has shown none of the virtues that have inspired the good-minded people to canonize her a saint—except in her good deeds which have marched across the country. By nature she is no more equipped to be a "do-gooder" than the average person. A more versatile, adventurous and effective salesman could hardly be found, nor a more thoroughly independent and outspoken person.

She gets angry, she says, "like everybody else." She gets morosely discouraged, too. She has had to undergo shame, fear and a loneliness that know no assuaging. But what she has above all else is *will.* And she knows how to mix gentleness and tenderness with strength.

It was no namby-pamby who was chosen universally as one of the 12 great women *leaders* of the past 100 years, who inspired the New York *Times* to couple her name with Thomas A. Edison in its evaluation of great outstanding Americans. It was a warrior of some mettle who received this accolade from Mark Twain: "The two most interesting characters of the 19th century are Napoleon and Helen Keller."

Helen Keller *is* great. At times she shows almost a Solomon's wisdom: her year-in and year-out efforts on behalf of the world's cried-down people prove that she has a world compassion. But as Carl Sandburg once said: "If there is any pity to be wasted in connection with Helen Keller, bestow it upon her companion and opponent of the hour. He's sure to need it."

Finley Peter Dunne, the author, in talking to Mark Twain about Helen Keller, once observed: "How dull it must be for her! Every day the same and every night the same as the day." To which Twain retorted: "You're damned wrong! Blindness is an exciting business. If you don't believe it, get up on the wrong side of the bed some night when the house is on fire and try to find the door."

Helen Keller casts the same spell over anyone who sits with her for a few hours. Her eyes seem to look straight into yours. And they are alive and pretty eyes. It is impossible to think of her as deaf, for she seems to be listening to you. No one would interrupt her conversation, for few people have such a command of English. It is not curiosity that brings the world's great to her door. It was Harpo Marx who said of her humor: "I'll best her yet! I'll learn a new joke."

John D. Rockefeller once said to her, after a long conversation about financial matters: "Helen, it's a good thing you weren't born a man. I wouldn't have wanted to compete with you." Alexander Woollcott exclaimed after an evening in her house: "How can one small lady hold such a vast store of knowledge?" And Broadway showman Billy Rose quipped, "You confound the most amazing people."

HELEN KELLER WAS born a normal child in Tuscumbia, Alabama, on June 27, 1880. Both her mother and father were related to illustrious families, but like most Southerners of the time they were land poor. Her father, Captain Keller, was a newspaper editor who dabbled in politics. As the first child of the family, the bright and pretty Helen came, saw and con-

quered. She was the spoiled spitfire of a very happy couple.

Then one night, when she was 19 months old, tragedy struck—a mysterious fever described as "acute congestion of the stomach and brain." No hope was held for recovery. All night long the battle for her life went on, and into days and nights that followed while the fever held its grip. Then one morning the disease left as mysteriously as it had come. She lay calm, white and seemingly conscious. But when the parents held out a doll, no hand reached for it.

Her gray-blue eyes looked up but showed no signs of recognition. When they spoke to her, she did not reply. Then the doctor said gently: "She is alive, and that is all. She can neither see you, hear you nor speak to you."

The weeks that followed were filled with horror for the Kellers. Their daughter, according to the belief of the times, was a complete idiot. A hopelessness descended on the house and its shuttered windows. But then, one day, little Helen proceeded to get out of bed. And things began to happen. She wanted to run, to laugh, and to play. She could only stumble and fall. She wanted to shriek and laugh and be with other children. She could not utter a sound. All her emotions lay heavy and cold, locked inside her.

She became a little hellion, this girl who had been a vivacious, laughing, happy child. Now, with only primitive reflexes left, she had no outlet for mirth or anger—except violence. When she was pleased she would smile and giggle. When she was angry she would kick and scratch. Moody, idle, intelligent, the uneasy silence that cloaked her became almost unbearable. In her book she says: "I felt as if invisible hands were holding me and I made frantic efforts to escape."

Her mother and father could not, would not, put her in an institution. In desperate hope Captain Keller journeyed to Washington to see Dr. Alexander Graham Bell, who had been doing some work for the deaf. Dr. Bell, quickly interested in Helen's case, wrote to the Perkins Institute for the Blind in Boston and asked them to send a special teacher. Thus, Anne Mansfield Sullivan arrived at the Keller home on the day "the little hellcat" was seven years old.

A person blessed by divine touch, Anne Sullivan was well equipped to deal with the tantrums, the cunning and the intelligence of Helen. Orphaned as a child, she had been brought up in an almshouse until, blinded herself, she had been sent to Perkins. After several years an operation was performed and she regained her sight. "It was as if a Master Mind had planned the whole thing," she once said, "because I knew so well the terror that infested the mind of Helen Keller."

Anne agreed to take over the education of a child who could only be taught by touch, taste and smell —certainly a doubtful career for a lovely girl of 20. Her only guidance was a "loving heart, the personal experience of blindness and a firm belief in a child" who was about as approachable as a rattlesnake. What was to become a friendship that lifted two people to a pinnacle of world respect started out as a pitched battle between two strong

wills. Mutinous and misguided, Helen was accustomed to having her own way: she decided to get rid of this new hindrance. "Teacher" thought otherwise.

Each gauged the other's strength by maneuvering. Even getting Helen to do the simplest things, such as combing her hair, was a struggle. When Teacher tried discipline, Helen rebelled. One day she locked her mother in the pantry, then laughed as her mother pounded on the door. She tormented Negro children on the plantation by tearing off their clothes. She upset her baby sister's cradle, and was not even concerned as to whether the infant had been injured.

"I suppose I will have many battles with this little woman," Anne wrote to a friend, "until I can teach her two things—obedience and love."

After countless sporadic storms, Anne begged the Kellers to let her take Helen and live apart in a cottage on the property, for she knew that discipline was impossible in the parents' presence. Reluctantly they agreed. From that day on things were different. "My heart is singing," Anne wrote after a few months. "The little savage has learned her first lesson in obedience and finds the yoke not too hard."

This first lesson began with a doll. Anne gave the doll to Helen and then spelled d-o-l-l in the manual alphabet in the child's hand. This simple word took two days to learn. But the infinite patience of Anne Sullivan continued.

The second great step in Helen's education came about by accident. All morning, Teacher had been trying to get her to understand the difference between a mug and the milk in the mug. Discouraged, she took Helen for a walk, during which they passed a well where water was being pumped. She put Helen's hand under the water and then tried to impart the connection between the feel of the water and the texture of milk.

Suddenly Helen received the intuitive flash. A thrill ran through her. Later she wrote of the incident: "A misty consciousness as of something long forgotten came over me; and the mystery of language was revealed. The word w-a-t-e-r startled my soul and it awoke . . . "

That night for the first time Helen crawled into bed with Teacher and put her arms around her neck. The little savage had been tamed at last.

HAVING EMERGED from her dark cell, Helen was like a healthy little animal. With a heart on fire, a brain possessed, a soul haunted by a strange impelling something that would not let it rest, she wanted to learn everything—and at once. In a fever of excitement she explored everything, asking Teacher so rapidly for explanations that it was difficult to keep pace with her learning. The world was suddenly so vast, so terrific, so beautiful that she wanted to catch up with it fast.

Anne Sullivan spelled out for her: "The best and most beautiful things in the world cannot be seen or even touched, but just felt in the heart." These words have lived with Helen Keller ever since, and have enlivened her world.

In March, 1890, Helen and Miss

Sullivan went to Boston and entered the Horace Mann School for the Deaf. The school had agreed to work with the girl's voice and see if she could learn to speak. After several lessons she was able to pronounce haltingly but triumphantly: "I am not dumb now."

They knew then that they could teach her to speak, but she must accept the discouraging reality that her voice could never sound normal. Today her voice is low-pitched and somewhat difficult to understand, but with people who know her well she converses with ease.

By the time she was ten years old, Helen had become a national figure. The Perkins Institute published a report of her progress and the press descended. While the publicity was distasteful to modest Anne Sullivan, she knew it would be useful to Helen, for it introduced them to a coterie of outstanding people and devoted friends who meant a lot to them later on when the financial situation became acute.

Everybody wanted to see Helen. President Cleveland received them at the White House; the Rev. Phillips Brooks undertook to enlighten Helen on religious matters. She exchanged letters with Oliver Wendell Holmes and John Greenleaf Whittier. William James called on her at Perkins Institute, and her oldest and best friend, Dr. Alexander Graham Bell, took her to "see" Niagara Falls.

Later when she went to New York to study at Wright-Humason School, her social contacts included almost all of *Who's Who in America*. Witty, bright, argumentative, rebellious and very much alive, she enchanted such notables as John D. Rockefeller, William Dean Howells, Woodrow Wilson and Henry van Dyke. Harsen Rhoades and H. H. Rogers raised money for her education. She met Mark Twain, and the moment they clasped hands she felt they were to be friends for life. And they were—until his death.

Since the age of eight, Helen had resolved to go to college, and now her restless intellect reached out beyond ordinary things. She longed to know mathematics, science and the politics of our country. Having at her disposal the best intellects of America, she drained them dry of knowledge. And in return, her once-diseased body and mind gave stimulus to lordly souls. Andrew Carnegie said to her: "There was a time when I would have had no time for you. But look what you have taught me!"

When she broke through the stern serenity of Radcliffe College and "made them take her by passing entrance exams," she met her severest test. For both Helen and Teacher, the college presented a struggle, the most difficult obstacle being lack of time and books. Everything had to be put into Braille for Helen, or translated hour after hour into her hand. She could not hear or see lecturers; she could not read their books. She wrote of Miss Sullivan's agility: "Her words rush through my hands like hounds in pursuit of a hare."

She read Braille until her fingertips bled. She worked in an atmosphere of grim determination and excitement. Long after normal bodies and minds were asleep, little Helen, who needed no lights for her work, was rushing through Braille. Sometimes she never went

to bed, but directly to class: yet at times discouragement bore down until her mind almost cracked.

A few instructors finally sensed her fine mind, and Charles Townsend Copeland inspired her to write an autobiography. "You have something to say," he told her, "and your own way of saying it." She decided to start right away, to provide funds for her expensive education, for she didn't like being dependent on anyone. Between the book and her college work, she almost had a breakdown.

In 1904 Helen Keller was graduated from Radcliffe "cum laude." The college paid no attention—but the world did. She was the first blind deaf-mute in history to receive an academic degree. She had not only earned it, in the face of antagonism, but she had earned it *with honors*. From that day onward, the tide turned for all the handicapped people of the world. The will, the strength, the fighting courage of Helen Keller had lifted the spirits of millions of unfortunates doomed to despair.

EVEN THOUGH Helen had won her first major victory, there was still the problem of earning a living. What could she do? Striving to make herself independent, she was constantly warding off the sympathy of curiosity and proffered sums of money. But if appeals for help came in, she gave whatever she had.

When she won the Annual Achievement Award of $5,000 from *Pictorial Review*, she gave it to an agency for the blind. When Andrew Carnegie offered her an annuity, she refused, preferring to be on her own. He let the offer stand "on probation." It stood a long time before Helen Keller accepted it—and never for herself.

In her efforts to earn a living, she had tried farming, writing, lecturing, vaudeville and the movies. By the time she had finished college, she had earned enough from writing to buy a little farm. Meanwhile John Macy, a young man from Harvard, had been hired to type her manuscripts and translate books into Braille. She, Macy (who later married Anne Sullivan) and Teacher bought another farm in Wrentham, Massachusetts, and moved in. But since they knew little about farming, the project failed.

It was while at Wrentham, however, that Helen began her efforts to help the blind on a full-time scale. It was there she made her important contribution to the prevention of blindness in children by fighting the taboos that cloaked venereal disease. Today, a solution of silver nitrate or some other preparation is used against the germ that may attack the eyes of children at birth.

It was inevitable that Helen Keller and Hollywood should mix. Movies were young in those days, and grasping for ideas. They hit upon Helen Keller as a means of bringing "a message of hope to a war-weary world." She went into movies as full of bounce as a rubber ball. Moreover, she thought the film might save Mrs. Macy from financial difficulties, for Teacher's health was failing and Helen felt responsible for her.

But when the picture finally opened, the critics drew a kindly

veil across it. Helen was delivered financially by accepting Carnegie's offer, which would help to take care of Teacher. And when Teacher had recovered from the rigors of motion-picture making, the two were invited into vaudeville.

At first it seemed strange to appear on the Orpheum Circuit with trained seals and acrobats, but the act was kept dignified and Helen Keller swept the country with her charm, her excitement, her obvious love of the theater. Even the question period never stumped her. She always had a witty response.

Her first lecture in Montclair, New Jersey, however, so unnerved Helen that she ran from the stage. But her later lectures were a great success, and she and Anne toured the country, until at last faithful Teacher collapsed in a hotel room and Helen was helpless. John Macy had gone away and both women knew he would not be back. Anne Sullivan Macy was losing her eyesight again, and there was no one as yet to take her place with Helen.

By now Helen Keller had become more of an institution than a woman. She was asked to speak before meetings and legislatures, to serve on commissions, to write articles, to raise funds, to travel abroad and interest European countries in the cause of blindness. Her mail was an engulfing torrent, sometimes mounting to thousands of letters a week; she was a clearing house for all information concerning the blind. All of this had become much too much for Teacher and Helen.

Shortly after Teacher's collapse, Helen bought a home in Forest Hills, New York, and sought someone to help with the multitude of details. It was then that Polly Thompson arrived on the scene. Before Miss Thompson came, everyone said: "What will Helen do when Mrs. Macy has gone?" After she arrived people were soon saying: "What would the two of them do without Miss Thompson?"

She started as secretary, remained to become counselor, adviser, friend and companion. With the passing of Anne Sullivan Macy, she was more than ready to step in as full-time secretary and companion.

The death of Teacher was a blow to Helen Keller. Shortly after Anne's death she wrote: "I lived too long with Teacher's scintillating personality to be content with ordinary folk. I shall look about despite myself for the sparkle with which she charmed the dullest person into a new appreciation of beauty, justice and human rights. My fingers will cry out for her descriptive touches, her exquisite tenderness, her bright summaries of conversation and books. But I shall go on with my work because I know Teacher would have said I should."

Helen has gone on. Incessantly active, she has earned a handsome living with her prolific writing on a thousand subjects. When the American Foundation for the Blind was set up in 1923, she became a staff member and has since become one of its most valuable assets. In the past two years she has visited hundreds of veterans' hospitals. When one hardboiled sergeant heard she was coming, he exclaimed: "Why she must be 100 years old!" When she left he said: "I thought I was handicapped until I met her. Why, I'm only blind!"

Today, at 66, Helen Keller

shows no signs of exhaustion. Physically, the most striking thing about her is her animation. She is fair-complexioned; her blue-gray eyes are alive and active, with none of the fixed stare usually associated with the blind. Infinitely feminine, she is always well-groomed and delights in a shopping spree. Her hats are as gay as Hedda Hopper's.

In conversation or argument, she has a thousand expressions. Her quiet talk is of ordinary things—her garden flowers, the feel of air and sun. Her expressions are truly colorful: gray is "a soft shawl around the shoulders"; blue is "the wide sweep of the sky"; red is "warmth, courage and companionship." George Bernard Shaw told her: "If only all Americans could see as well as you do."

When Arcan Ridge, her home in Westport, Connecticut, burned to the ground last November while Helen Keller was in Europe, her large and cherished collection of books in Braille was destroyed. Upon hearing the news, the people of England presented her with a complete set of Shakespeare in Braille. With Polly Thompson and a small household staff, Miss Keller is now living temporarily in a Westport house loaned her by friends.

In "listening" to people talk, Helen Keller places her thumb on the speaker's throat, the first two fingers on the lips and the third finger on the base of the nose. If they "don't get embarrassed," she can *hear* everything they say. Meanwhile, Polly Thompson is translating the entire conversation into Miss Keller's hand so swiftly and accurately that nothing is missed.

Sensitive to the moods of friends, Helen Keller can tell by the way their hands touch hers just how they are feeling. She scoffs at the idea of a sixth sense, or at the suggestion that her powers of touch or smell are more acute than others just because she is blind and deaf. "I have been pinched, pricked, squeezed, buzzed, everything but vivisected," she laughs, "and I still come out just normal."

Helen Keller's spirit abounds with the joy of living. Inevitably she must have spells of depression, but she never permits them to go beyond her own borders. "I seldom think about my limitations," she says, "but sometimes there is just a touch of yearning, vague like the swift perfume of a flower."

A friend has paid her the tribute accepted generally: "Hers is a soul that accepts whatever conditions come to it—a great and dearly loved human being."

Secret of Success

THE EDITOR OF a country newspaper retired with a fortune. When asked the secret of his success he replied: "I attribute my ability to retire with $100,000 savings, after 30 years in newspaper work, to diligent application to work, pursuing a policy of strict honesty, always practicing rigorous rules of economy, and to the death of my uncle who left me $110,000." —JOHN QUILL

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